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## AN EXPERIMENT IN TEACHING ENGLISH.

SEVERAL years ago, there fell to the lot of the writer an opportunity to teach English in the high school of a country town. The town was a pretty, amiable town: the school, too, was cheerful and amiable, though shamefully run down from five years of change, misrule, and no rule. Set in the heart of a coal field, our population was a mixed one, and we sometimes had in our schoolroom representatives of five or six nationalities, many foreign-born, though under seventeen years of age. The public schools of the borough served a population of about five thousand, but Polish, Italian, Slav, and Hungarian families rarely left their children in school beyond the upper grammar grades. We hardly lacked variety, however, as things stood, and a small admixture of the old Yankee stock, children of well-to-do families of transplanted New Englanders, with six generations of books and brains behind them, furnished another contrast.

Such was our material; moreover, it was raw material. To such a degree had custom stated the infinite variety of grammar school routine that our thirteen-year-olds came up to us from the eighth grade veritable little Bourbons. They had learned nothing and they had forgotten nothing since the days of the fifth grade, and, Bourbon-like, they didn't propose to begin. They would not read aloud intelligibly, far less intelligently, from anything but the *Readers*, which they had by heart. Their spelling knew no law; anarchy prevailed among the parts of speech; the commonest rules of grammar belonged only between the brown covers of a text-book, and never, by any chance, were allowed to come out to hinder people in the affairs of practical life. In three successive years, three grammar-school teachers had exacted tribute to the amount of two "compositions" a year, on such topics as "Chalk," "Rivers," "A Rainy Day," "Evangeline," "Clouds," "Farming" and "Wild Birds." Very naturally, no one of the sixty-five little Bourbons had ever guessed that written work aimed, first and foremost, to train the mind to

think clearly and straight to the point, whether for speech or writing. A composition was a thing one wrote when the teacher required it ; it was copied in a fair hand with a fine pen on glazed paper, had an inch-and-a-half margin at the left, the title written as handsomely as possible at the top of the page ; had two or three paragraphs, each beginning with a capital letter beautifully flourished, each indented carefully, each owing its very existence to a desire on the penman's part to " make the page look pretty." Sometimes the whole production was a single sentence linked with fifteen or eighteen and's and but's ; the paragraphs with their spacing and initial capitals by no means breaking the peaceful continuity of the whole, merely pleasing the artistic sense of the reader by beauty of line and mass, and tailing off modestly with a non-committal comma after the last word, to be succeeded by another installment of capitals and conjunctions on the next line.

In mental training, the writers of these precious " compositions " were again pitifully lacking, and conspicuously in literary matters. In common with the other fifty pupils of the high school, who had come through the same mill in their day, the newly promoted class devoutly believed Longfellow the only very great poet of the English race, Holmes, Lowell, Whittier and Bryant receiving a mild sort of honorable mention. They had read, in the straight (and narrow) path of school duty, *Evangeline*, *Hiawatha*, *The Courtship of Miles Standish*, *The Rainy Day*, *The Psalm of Life*, *Snowbound*, *Maud Muller*, *Thanatopsis*, with short extracts from the prose of Webster and Emerson. They had read enough, they thought ; they resisted determinedly the suggestion that they read something more. In moments of heart to heart confidences, one learned from the more outspoken members that " the class just can't *bear* any more poetry ; O, Miss ———, it's *so* dull ! " And prose was almost as bad, so far as " school selections " went ; though in private the girls read Edna Lyall and the classics of Bertha M. Clay, while the boys carried Henty books under their arms to hide the bulging rolls of *Diamond Dick*, *Jesse James*, *Luck and Pluck*, *Work and Win*, *Old Sleuth*, and all the tribe of penny-dreadfuls, that distended their

coat fronts. In a town that had no public library and no book store, where people live well and dress well and are content to own no books, was it not a deplorable situation ?

The present writer was fresh from college, used to living among books, and full of that certain zealous energy which belongs to one trying the paces of a hobby or experimenting to testing a long cherished theory. For I had a theory that narrative was the easiest and simplest method of teaching children over seven years of age, as the kindergarten appeal to the body through the mind is called the easiest under that age : that narrative is the natural habit of thought and speech of most children and young persons, and that narrative is, therefore, the most purely natural of all literary forms ; and that, lastly, the literary education of young minds is best begun and carried along by means of narrative until the critical sense and constructive instinct are unconsciously developed. Here was the best of opportunity to try my theory. I was in sole charge of both the history and the English, to change, arrange, and rearrange, buy books and discard books at discretion. The sixty-five were for the most part shrewd, sensible, healthy children, ready-witted and good tempered. So indeed were most of their elders of the three higher classes, but for this report of my experiment I purpose to confine myself to the progress of the youngest grade.

A thorough course in English grammar (five appointments a week), with a good text-book, was shamefully necessary; that was routine work, drill, drill, and drill again, and nine months was none too long a term for the work. One appointment a week was dedicated to composition work, but under one disguise or another work in written composition was exacted daily. The formal study of rhetoric and English literature was postponed indefinitely, and we began instead a nondescript course of reading, writing, class discussion, and criticism, which stood on the school program as "Classics," a safe name that bound the faculty to nothing in particular.

With the sixty-five divided into two sections and provided with a book apiece, we began to read *The Lady of the Lake*. The strong narrative interest of the book was a qualification of first

importance ; it was as different as possible from *Evangeline* or *Hiawatha*, in the second place ; thirdly, I wanted to work the class hard for a month or two in a fresh line, and the necessary historical references afforded just such a burden as their young shoulders needed ; lastly, the poetry-worn ears and brains were to discover for themselves, classify, and memorize the simpler elements of versification, a quest nowhere more easily satisfied than in the varied verse forms and stanzas of this book. For the first few days it was up-hill work. Omitting the Spenserian stanzas of the introduction, we began at once the story of the hunt, reading aloud in class without previous preparation ; and not more than three out of thirty-three could read six lines without outrageous mistakes in pronunciation, while the simple rhythm of the verse was lost altogether. Even the fluent readers, who could pronounce the unusual words, had little idea of the sense of the text ; and in the general darkness, to order a word by word translation with dictionaries would have been to add despair to discouragement. With the air of making the best of a bad matter, we read doggedly on, a few lines at a time, and cleared up dark passages as we could, for the first few days. But presently pocket-dictionaries began to appear all unbidden ; and as the unlucky victim of the moment stumbled on toward a formidable, meaningless, unpronounceable word some lines ahead, one heard the dictionary leaves flutter, and at the crisis eight or ten enterprising young persons could tell him how to pronounce it. This was the beginning, and from this stage the lump leavened itself most satisfactorily. To know the meaning of outlandish words became a matter of distinction ; to pronounce anything and everything correctly in reading was no more than proper pride.

Presently, too, the interest of the story, the direct and simple appeal to imagination, gained the mastery over prejudice and indolence alike. As soon as this had happened, it became safe to comment upon particular bits of description for their charm, their vividness ; to question how this or that bit of workmanship reacted upon the reader's mind, and what the secret was that made unlike matters interesting by the simple device of group-

ing them closely together. The discovery that iambic tetrameter and trochaic tetrameter differed in sound because of a very real structural difference left the class fairly swollen with pride, so that the graphic representation of these verses was mere play, and the rather difficult terminology almost "remembered itself." The true inwardness and reasonableness of rhyme was a puzzle that lasted us through weeks, and the difference between correct verse and good poetry remained a matter of dispute to the very end. The school library of reference books was ransacked for information about Scottish history in general and the Douglas family in particular, and Scott's own notes upon customs and folk-lore aroused a natural curiosity about his personality and the details of his life. After about eight weeks of this kind of study and of almost daily practice in putting some ideas on paper, the written work of the class began to improve. Conjunctions diminished, and periods and semi-colons crept in. Here and there in the class individuals formed a habit of coming to the point in a few words, and of writing about one thing at a time—a tremendous step in advance. New words slipped from *The Lady of the Lake* into private keeping, and great was the innocent pride of the borrowers in displaying them here and there. And all of these desirable things came about because the children were teaching themselves unconsciously while engrossed in the story. So far, the theory was working well.

Then, at the end of twelve weeks, came the term examination. I laughed over the papers, and scowled, and laughed again, but I read them with an interest that I never thought to feel in sixty papers on the same subject. Nearly every page was stated clearly enough to make the writer's thought plain, which was in itself a substantial good; but what an expanse of intelligent ignorance stood revealed! In the same paper with a piece of discerning criticism of the plot structure and a brief character sketch which showed real grasp and penetration, occurred these annotations: "A Bard is an article of Highland dress, or a weapon for defense. A Druid is a string of colored lights that they used to hang out on the hill-tops when one of their chiefs or the head of a Highland family died, to let the people

know." Another, a painstaking, conscientious student, is the authority for the following definitions: "Poetry," said she, voicing her own opinion, often heretofore maintained in class discussions against the faction who would ascribe all honor and glory to meter and rhyme alone,— "is language put into print that is excited by imagination. Meter is —" Here memory and courage alike flagged, and she dishonorably had recourse to a pocket Webster, all too much abridged, coming out triumphantly with this treasure: "Meter is a measure of harmony at a length of nearly thirty-nine and a half inches." In her hurry a semi-colon had been lost, and the preposition "at" fell into place by association; her newly acquired "dictionary habit" then prevailed against the conviction that the definition stood for no idea, and the paper was handed in as written.

Fresh from *The Lady of the Lake*, with their imaginations still kindled by their taste of historical fiction and antiquarian lore, the class went gallantly through the *Sketch Book*, undertaking more and more independent library work as time went on, till one beheld the spectacle of children who had never heard of Tennyson laboriously trying to spell out verses of *The Kinges Quhair*, or distractedly thumbing Gray's *Garden and Field Botany* to find out what kind of thing was the "spray of gillieflower," carried into the tower window by the dove, back in those days when Windsor Castle was both a fortress and a prison. Much of it was effort to little purpose, of course, but because the free use of books is a precious craft to learn I was willing to see them waste a little energy on trifles, rather than interrupt their researches and discount their results by ill-timed advice.

The *Vicar of Wakefield* came next, the stimulus of a story renewing at once the somewhat jaded interest of the class. Here more than ever before it was profitable and safe to scrutinize the master's workmanship, to say, "How was it done?" and, "Why was this done so?" I know of no book that affords to a class struggling to write good English such abundant, efficient, practical help as this. The pleasant, simple style, the everyday topics, the transparent reasonableness with which that wonderful craftsman develops a character, introduces an element

of pathos or a touch of gayety, or uses a contrast, are things that a child of thirteen can both admire and profit by.

Last of all, and crowning glory of the year, the class came back to the great wizard, and read *Ivanhoe*. I am not sure but that *Kenilworth* or *Waverly* might have done as well and awakened the same enthusiasm, but certainly no book could have fallen in more neatly with the outside reading which had accompanied the *Lady of the Lake* and the *Sketch Book*. "Douglas of the Bleeding Heart" had sent us to Aytoun's ballad, and the errand of Bruce's heart had drawn us further back to investigate the Crusades. The genealogy of James Fitzjames and the prisoner of Windsor had given us an interest in the English royal house. Then the crusading templar whose effigy Irving saw in the country church, lying with his feet crossed, had provoked interest in the Order of the Temple. In *Ivanhoe* all these lines converged, and there was, beside, fighting and bloodshed enough to satisfy the devotees of "Jesse James" and "Diamond Dick;" while Rebecca and Rowena, associating only with court favorites and twice rescued by royalty itself, far outshone the paler splendors of those modern sentimentalists, who never involve the heroine in a siege and rarely do better for her than an earl. During the five weeks that we spent on *Ivanhoe*, tradition and decorum were so far forgotten that the classes actually groaned when the class bell ended the recitation! They cheerfully undertook to read thirty pages and look up all necessary references therein as their daily task, to be prepared from one day's recitation to the next; though early in September they had protested that one hundred lines of the *Lady of the Lake* was a burden greater than they could bear. It was a fury of enthusiasm that possessed them, growing by what it fed on.

During all the later work on the *Vicar*, *Ivanhoe*, and the final reviews and comparisons of our year's work, I noticed a surprising development of the critical faculty and of standards of literary judgment. I had believed strongly, when I undertook this course, in the receptiveness and innate reasonableness of the ordinary child, if properly approached. Yet I had taken it for granted that all literary judgments were the acquirements of



later years, and so highly artificial in their very nature as to depend upon a deliberate study of criticism for existence. Here were these raw children, unlettered almost, reading a few books, and questioning their structure now and then, but receiving scarcely an opinion from me or from any outsider, suddenly commending and condemning points in character-drawing, plot-structure, proportion, and style, with a keenness of insight and a breadth of judgment that need not discredit a Coleridge or a Hazlitt. True, the form of their comments was often crude and uncouth; but the idea was there. Moreover, they were surprisingly unanimous on most points; a trifling incident given undue length and importance in a story did not come off with one protest, or with twenty. They were the keenest critics on the score of probability that I ever found; the veriest trifles were weighed and remembered, and their researches now and again led to an odd discovery; as, for example, that the ages of the younger children of the Primrose family, if tested and applied at every turn, quite upset the chronology of the book. For the *Lady of the Lake*, we had a map of the Trosachs and Loch Lomond; for *Ivanhoe*, we traced King Richard's return from Palestine, through his captivity, and on to England, followed Cedric and Ivanhoe and the templar about on the map of England, and even adorned our blackboards with ground plans of the Ashby tilt yard and the castle of Torquilstone, drawn as accurately as might be!

Upon comparing the June examinations with the set of papers which I had found so encouraging in December, I may own to an honest satisfaction and pride. The improvement in thought and in language was marked. What was more, the improvement did not mean a temporary concession, a temporary imitation of the teacher's tone, in order to earn a higher grade; rather, the pupils had improved themselves, the change marking an inward growth which was more than a temporary gain. In addition, some of them had acquired a taste for well-written books and could not return to the old favorites; I learned later on of several such cases.

In looking back upon this experiment, I am more than ever convinced of the value of teaching English, whether rhetoric

composition, or literature, in connection with, and by means of, the reading of some vivid narrative. To appeal to the imagination and to the order of thought which is natural to the mind is to discover a line of least resistance. And if we can teach along a line of least resistance, is it not a gain?

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